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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 005101

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS CARETAKER PRIME MINISTER

REF: ISLAMABAD 4890

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a courtesy call with Ambassador, Caretaker Prime Minister Muhammedmian Soomro reiterated the government's commitment to facilitate election observers. He promised immediate action to resolve eviction notices and visa problems of the International Republican Institute and The Asia Foundation, both of which are working on election programs funded by the USG. Soomro looked to the political parties, the domestic media, and the international community to ensure free and fair parliamentary elections on January 8. He informed the Ambassador that the state of emergency "would be phased out," leaving some remote areas under emergency rule. Soomro was unsympathetic to GEO TV, the last broadcaster to remain off the air because of state of emergency restrictions. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met November 28 with Pakistan's Caretaker Prime Minister (and Senate Chairman) Muhammedmian Soomro. Constitutionally, Soomro's primary duty as caretaker is to oversee Pakistan's election process until a new government can be formed following the January 8 parliamentary elections.

IRI/TAF Problems

¶3. (C) The Ambassador informed Soomro that U.S. and U.S.-sponsored election observer missions were currently finalizing their coverage plans and would likely increase the number of observers. She welcomed statements by President Musharraf that Pakistan was open to all election observers, but noted that both the International Republican Institute (IRI) and The Asia Foundation's (TAF) domestic group had run into separate problems.

¶4. (C) IRI has been asked (twice) by the Economic Affairs Division to leave the country (we suspect after IRI published a poll showing Musharraf's declining popularity). That Division has refused to sign a memorandum of understanding with the organization, which would allow it to continue its operation in-country. Some of IRI's international observers are facing delays in receiving visas from Pakistani Embassies abroad. In addition, TAF's local director had his Pakistani visa canceled (for unclear reasons) by the Interior Ministry. Ambassador raised these issues with former Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao, but Sherpao was replaced by a caretaker

minister before he resolved either the problems of either IRI or TAF.

15. (C) Soomro was surprised to hear these details and immediately ordered his staff to call the appropriate ministries to resolve both issues. He echoed Musharraf's statements that observer missions would enjoy "free access" and that they would have the government's "full support." Soomro added, "We believe the more observers, the better, so there will be no doubt cast on these elections." He then speculated that electoral fraud would be impossible because of the intense focus of the international community and of domestic media.

Free and Fair Elections

16. (C) However, Soomro placed responsibility for a credible election process on the shoulders of Pakistan's political parties. "As caretaker, I want wide participation," adding that he had tried to establish contact with the opposition to respond to their concerns. He noted that most of these parties chose not to comment on the Election Commission's Code of Conduct for Political Parties. Soomro rhetorically asked, "If the political parties do not cooperate, how can the government react?"

17. (C) For practical reasons, most (if not all) of the opposition would participate in the parliamentary elections, Soomro predicted. He announced that the voter roll was now complete, though not yet posted on the Election Commission's website. Referring to the military change of command ceremony earlier in the day, Soomro noted that this would be

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"the first truly peaceful transition" from one government to the next.

State of Emergency

18. (C) Whether the state of emergency would be lifted before the elections, Soomro would only say: "If things improve in Swat." He predicted that emergency would be phased out, and "only certain districts would remain under emergency."

GEO TV: Odd Man Out

19. (C) The Ambassador repeated the U.S. position that the GOP should immediately allow GEO TV to begin broadcasting again. Soomro replied that "only" 38 of 75 channels were blocked on November 3. Since then, all but the four GEO channels were back on the air. Soomro would only say that the GOP and GEO were "in discussions." He claimed that all other stations had accepted the new media code of conduct: "It is universal." An exception just for GEO could not be made. He concluded that the new code was "in the public interest" and "drafted in consultation with media groups."

110. (C) Comment: As Caretaker Prime Minister, Soomro has little power to make wide policy decisions, but we will continue to press him on the conduct of the elections. Separately, Post has requested that the MFA expedite the visas of IRI's international observer team members. End comment.

PATTERSON